

Kurdistan:

A Neglected Tourist Treasure

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Archaeological and historical sites are waiting to be discovered in the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.



The Kurds claim to be the most ancient people in the Middle East region and the Neolithic site at Jarmo, in northern Iraq, with a village dating back to 6,000 BC gives credence to their claims.

Arbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan and home to a million people, is believed to be one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities with many tourist attractions. Located along an important trade route, Arbil came under the control of the great empires of the ancient world including the Assyrians, Persians and Alexander the Great. The ancient citadel overlooks the hustle and bustle of everyday life in the modern city.

Kanan Mufti, director of antiquities in the western Kurdish region has a vision of the citadel as an artistic enclave and historic tourist destination. Some of the elaborate old homes are being used as backdrops for local filmmakers and his dream is slowly turning into reality.

Lolan Mustafa opened the Kurdish Textile Museum over a year ago. It displays intricately designed carpets made by local tribes in an attempt to preserve traditional handicrafts.

"We are trying to learn from the older generations of tribes but still it is not as clear as to how these designs are transferred from one generation to the next." Mustafa says his museum, which already gets about 50 visitors a day, demonstrates real potential. "It is a good sign for showing Kurdish culture, art and

history and the kind of stability that they can hang around in the citadel."

Throughout Kurdistan the magnificent scenery, sometimes wooded and watered by turbulent streams, sometimes gaunt and bare but always dramatic and often awesome, greets visitors. A 'must-see' is Gali Beg, where a waterfall tumbles 800m above sea level.

Attractions in Iranian Kurdistan include the marvelous ancient city of Takht e Soleiman (the throne of Solomon), the royal Persian city of Hamedan, the rock inscriptions at Bistoun and the mausoleum of the Mongol Sultan at Soltaniyeh.

In the Iranian rug trade Hamedan ranks second only to Kerman. Visitors may be interested in the tomb of Ibn Sina one of the most famous and influential of the philosopher-scientists of Islam.

Like Arbil, Hamedan, ancient Ecbatana, is listed as one of the oldest cities in the world reportedly founded by the mythical King Jamshid. It occupies a key site on the road, which even in antiquity linked Mesopotamia to the Iranian plateau.

In Turkish Kurdistan, Dogubayazit, in the shadow of Mt Ararat has the superb 16th-17th century Ishak Pasha Mosque

and complex. The town is on the popular overland trail to India. Ishak Pasha, an Ottoman Governor built his architectural marvel in the 17th century. Lake Van is the largest lake in Eastern Anatolia. It is the centerpiece of the ancient, mysterious Empire of Uratu (800BC). A contemporary of Assyria. Mount Ararat (5,165 m above sea level), the main peak in Turkey is higher than all other mountains in the United States or in Europe outside the Caucasus barring Alaska. The biblical Mount Ararat still stands as the snow-capped dormant volcano, which last erupted in 1840. They say during the mythological Deluge, Noah's Ark anchored on its summit.

Qamishli, home of Syria's Kurdish population, is in the far north east of Syria. Only a kilometre from the Syrian/Turkish border, on the Turkish side is Nusaybin or ancient Nisbis –a Roman site.

Veteran overland tour operator Geoff Hann is running tours to the Kurdish regions. He said "There are many sites which have not seen visitors for years and it time the area took its rightful place on the map of international tourism". ■